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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: OLIVE HARVEST KICKS OFF, LESS VIOLENTLY THAN
EXPECTED

Classified By: Consul General Daniel Rubinstein
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Post contacts say violence during the current olive harvest season has been lower than expected so far, but they offered different reasons for the decline. Rabbis for Human Rights, (RHR) Arik Ascherman said the IDF's increased presence in Palestinian orchards adjacent to settlements played a role. Israeli NGO Yesh Din's Lior Yavne said settlers appear less concerned that a settlement moratorium is imminent, and are therefore less prone to violent acts. PA Interior Minister Said Abu Ali said a poor crop meant fewer Palestinians participated in the harvest, thus minimizing potential friction posts. Yavne described settler violence against Palestinians as an organized rather than spontaneous phenomenon. End Summary.

START OF OLIVE HARVEST SEASON, CALMER THAN LAST YEAR'S

¶2. (C) In June 2006, after a campaign of property damage, theft, and harassment of Palestinian farmers by West Bank settlers, the Israeli High Court ruled that "protecting the security and possessions of the local (West Bank) residents is among the most basic obligations of the military commander in the field." According to RHR's Rabbi Arik Ascherman, the ruling addressed four crucial issues: allowing Palestinians access to their farmlands; protecting them from harm by Israelis; protecting them from property theft and damage; and ensuring justice in IDF dealings with Palestinians and settlers. "There has been very little progress in the last two categories," Ascherman said, "but there has been a lot of progress in the first two."

¶3. (C) Ascherman noted that in each olive harvest season since the ruling, the IDF has barred Israeli settlers from entering certain Palestinian lands adjacent to Israeli settlements, so that Palestinians can work in their orchards safely. These closed military zones will remain in effect until December 15, Ascherman said. He noted that his organization assembles volunteer groups to escort Palestinians during harvest time, to provide protection and to ensure that the IDF are upholding their obligations. In previous years, Ascherman said, the IDF stood by on occasion when settlers harassed Palestinian farmers, or prevented Palestinians from entering their orchards. "This year has been pretty good where the army is," Ascherman said, "They are doing their job."

¶4. (C) PolOff and Ascherman jointly observed IDF patrols of the orchards surrounding Kedumim (in Northwest West Bank, west of Nablus) and Itamar (in Northeast West Bank, east of Nablus) settlements, and the outpost of Havat Gilad (in Northwest West Bank, west of Nablus), on October 15. Pointing out an IDF patrol jeep perched among olive trees

outside Havat Gilad, Ascherman said, "this is new, this is good. They've been there every day for the last five weeks."

He noted that IDF had negotiated the cooperation of settler security officers in preventing settlement residents from entering closed military areas during the harvest. The IDF's active presence, he said, had resulted in reduced levels of settler violence this harvest season. "People know about the olive harvest now, the settlers know they are being watched," Ascherman said. He speculated, however, that violence may pick up during the plowing or planting seasons, when the IDF presence disappears.

15. (C) In a meeting with PolOff on October 20, PA Minister of Interior Said Abu Ali disputed the contention that improved IDF performance was responsible for the drop in violent incidents. "We are aware of (IDF Central Command) General Shamni's rapid reaction force," he noted, "but, frankly, the IDF are so widely deployed that their effective presence is practically nil." He argued, "compared to last year, there's less settler violence -- but that's because the harvest is bad and fewer farmers are harvesting, not because of better IDF guardianship." Abu Ali noted that "productivity (in Palestinian areas) this year did not even reach 30 percent," saying "in fact, some (Palestinians) didn't even bother to harvest olives at all, especially if they perceived there was a risk."

SETTLERS ORGANIZED; VIOLENCE POLITICALLY-MOTIVATED

16. (C) NGO observers also attributed this harvest season's relative calm to Israeli settlers' perception that a

JERUSALEM 00001925 002 OF 002

settlement moratorium is not imminent. Yesh Din's Lior Yavne told PolOff, "we've observed a direct correlation of the amount of tension on the settlers' streets with the perceived probability of a withdrawal." He argued that the level of organized incitement tends to correlate with settlers' perception of progress on the political front. At the beginning of the Obama Administration, he noted, the level of organized settler violence increased in reaction to speculation about peace talks. "Two months ago," he said, "if you asked us if we were worried about a 'Settler Intifada,' we were. But within the last two months, some efforts at the peace process have failed, so we're back to the regular level of tension."

17. (C) Yavne also noted Yesh Din has recently concluded that settler violence is more, and better, organized than they had previously thought. "Before, we thought that settler violence had no organization--that these incidents were one-off responses and random clashes," said Yavne. However, he noted, the existence of groups such as Land of the Israel Faithful and Women in Green, which provide training to members and use cellular networks and the internet to organize rallies, demonstrations and other activities, demonstrate otherwise. (Similarly, local press recently reported that the Zionist Freedom Alliance and the Shomron Liaison Office have established a program to bring American and Israeli youths together to build outposts in the West Bank.) The existence of tightly-knit networks, Yavne noted, means that changes in the political environment can trigger rapid organized responses from the settler movement.

SETTLER VIOLENCE CONTINUES

18. (C) There were a number of settler attacks on Palestinian orchards on October 19 - 20. Villagers in al-Lubban, near Nablus, reported that on October 20, settlers from nearby Eli attacked Palestinian farmers picking olives and set fire to the trees, burning ten dunums of land. Villagers in al-Mughayyer, near Ramallah, complained to the Civil Administration that settlers from the Binyamin Regional Council uprooted fifty olive trees from Palestinian fields on

the night of October 19. Incidents of settlers uprooting trees were also reported near the Susia settlement, south of Hebron.

¶9. (C) Meanwhile, base levels of settler violence continue, without regard to seasonal harvest activities. Yavne noted, "there's a constant level of settler violence in regards to land grabs and quarreling." Rashed Morrar, mayor of Upper Yanoun, told PolOff on October 15, that three weeks ago, settlers from Itamar chased Yanoun farmers from their lands and killed a number of goats. While PolOff was speaking with Palestinian villagers in the farmlands of Yanoun, RHR's Zakariah Saadeh received a phone call alerting him that gunshots were being fired into the air by settlers from Itamar, two kilometers away.

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